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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a rapid growth of interest in Sweden in vertically integrated classes in compulsory schools, especially at junior high school and intermediate grade levels. This development is supported in various ways by the curriculum, partly because it puts more emphasis than previous curricula on the occurrence of teaching situations involving children at different ages. In addition, the time schedules contained in the curriculum and its syllabi for various teaching subjects now refer to levels of schooling instead of particular grades. This report presents discussions on: (1) why so many teachers prefer classes including children from several grades; (2) what educational benefits teachers anticipate; (3) the limitations involved in vertical integration; (4) what different working procedures are involved in these classes; and (5) how childrens' cognitive and social development will be affected. (JD)

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SCHOOL RESEARCH

Newsletter

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CURRENT PROJECT

TITLE OF PROJECT Vertical integration at junior and intermediate levels

Vertical integration appears at present to be attracting large groups of teachers, especially at intermediate and junior levels. Why do so may teachers prefer classes including children from several grades? What educational benefits do they anticipate? What limitations are involved? What different working procedures are evolved in these classes, where the aim is often to break free of inter-grade boundaries also as regards subject content? How will the children's cognitive and social development be affected?

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APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES

Formal facts concerning the project

The project, which is being funded by the NBE, is planned for a three-year period up to and including the 1984/85 fiscal year. Work is now in progress on the collection of data, and this will be supplemented during the final year of the project, which will otherwise be mainly devoted to data processing, analyses and the compilation of reports.

The project is of the one-man variety and involves a work input corresponding to half time for the first year and full time for the third and final year.

Background

In recent years there has been a rapid growth of interest in vertically integrated classes in compulsory schools, especially at junior and intermediate levels. Teachers and pupils at some schools have already acquired several years' experience of this kind of teaching, while other schools have recently set up vertically integrated classes and many more communities will soon be following suit. These developments are supported in various ways by the curriculum (Lgr 80), partly because it puts more emphasis than previous curricula on the occurrence of teaching situations involving children at different ages. In addition, the time schedules contained by the curriculum and its syllabi for the various teaching subjects now refer to levels of school instead of particular grades. The description of working units makes it clear that these can also comprise pupils from different grades.

The special efforts recently inaugurated by the Government and Riksdag to improve working conditions at junior level

are also relevant in this connection. Inauguration of local development work in various forms is being encouraged through the allocation of extra resources and vertical integration teaching projects are quoted as examples of this kind of development work (Govt. Bill Prop. 1982/83:100). This should help to make verticle integration still more widespread.

Many educational advantages have been asserted by various teacher categories with experience of vertical integration. Reference is made, for example, to the superior opportunities which the vertically integrated class affords of developing a working approach which teachers find more meaningful and more beneficial to the pupils' cognitive and social development. Some schools have codified and recorded their experience of mixed-age classes as part of their ongoing development and evaluation work. In some cases vertical integration activities at individual schools or in individual classes have been subjected to evaluation.

The design and implications of vertically integrated teaching at junior and intermediate levels, on the other hand, have not been made the subject of any systematic study of activities and experiences at several schools with different opportunities and motives for introducing mixed-age classes.

Purpose and theoretical premisses

The purpose of this project is to study the background and design of vertically integrated teaching and in this way to enhance the possibilities of elucidating, over a longer period, the relationship between this type of teaching and the pupils' cognitive and social development.

For several years now, the Child and Youth Psychology Research Group has been making a study, from the vantage

point of developmental psychology, of questions relating to positive change and development in schools and child care. Theorisation and analysis are being based on a human-ecological approach. The individual forms part of, influences and is influenced by an environmental system which can be regarded as a sequence of interconnected, interpenetrating structures. The developmental process of the individual is influenced by the way in which the various components of this system are constructed, but also by relations between them. Analyses take as their point of departure a model in which an attempt is made to elucidate the way in which the conditions governing individual development are affected by the link between environmental influences at both macro and micro levels (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Andersson, 1982, 1983).

This approach also involves analysing actual opportunities and constraints in the environmental systems surrounding the individual and thus defining the frames within which the individual's developmental process takes place. The subjective experience and interpretation of these de facto environmental conditions by the individual provide a useful foundation for these analyses.

Project activities

The aim here is to explain the type of problem field and question with which we are concerned in the project. In some cases an indication will be given of the problem field itself, while other explanations will be confined to examples.

Terms and concepts

Several different terms are currently used to describe school activities involving children from different grades.

Some terms refer mainly to the organisational principles on which class structure is based, e.g. mixed-age classes. This makes it clear that a single teaching group or class includes children of different ages, just as the term B-school indicates the presence of classes including children from two or more grades - a long-standing tradition in Swedish educational history.

Other widely employed terms, such as non-graded or vertically integrated teaching, can be taken to reflect the teaching approach which a mixed-age organisation is intended to represent.

Within the project, some attention is being paid to studying the way in which these various terms are used by school staff and also in official reports, Government Bills and curricula. We wish to show whether the various names actually reflect simultaneous but different educational approaches in mixed-age classes or rather as part of the search for a common frame of reference and, accordingly, a common terminology for a relatively uniform type of educational activity.

Occurrence and diffusion

When the project began there was no systematic information available concerning the occurrence and diffusion of mixed-age classes. A nationwide survey was undertaken by the NBE in spring 1983, and the findings thus obtained have been codified as part of the present project. That survey included all compulsory school management districts in the 1982/83 school year and involved the administration of a short questionnaire to compulsory school head teachers in Sweden's eleven most populous municipalities and to chief education officers in the other municipalities.

The questionnaire included a resource-based definition of a vertical integration, respondents being asked whether their school management district/municipality that year had:

> teaching organised in such a way that pupils from different grades permanently formed mixed-age classes or groups, even if base resources are deployed on a grade-referenced basis.

If so, the respondents were asked to state the number of classes taking part, the grades involved and the length of time for which the activities had been in progress. They were also asked whether they planned to introduce new classes of this kind in future school years. It should be noted that this inventory did not include B-schools. Data concerning the occurrence of these classes are already obtainable through the annual decisions made by county education committees for the allocation of base resources to each individual school.

Among other things this summary confirmed the relatively steep rise in the number of mixed-age classes in recent years and their occurrence mainly at junior level, though classes of this kind have also grown more numerous at intermediate level. Mixed-age classes, however, only constitute a small percentage of the total number of junior and intermediate level classes at present, divided between roughly 10% of the country's school management districts. The survey also showed that a large number of municipalities and school management districts were planning to introduce mixed-age classes.

This geographical inventory of mixed-age classes provided the starting point for the project team's data-collection activities during the present school year. A comprehensive

questionnaire has been addressed to all class teachers in the school management districts concerned.

Motives, aims and expectations

The introduction of a mixed-age class organisation at junior and intermediate levels can be prompted by a variety of motives. The traditional motive underlying B-schools appears to be growing more and more prominent; in other words, the pupil base of the individual school is insufficient for entire classes to be made up of children coming from one grade only.

In other cases more specifically educational motives are involved and the introduction of mixed-age classes has not been necessitated by the insufficiency of the pupil population. At junior level the aim sometimes is to ease the transition between pre-school education and school, with mixed-age groups sometimes including both pre-school and junior level children. Some of these integration experiments have been initiated by the NBE and National Board of Health and Welfare.

More commonly, however, mixed-age classes at junior and intermediate levels have emerged at the instance of the school staff concerned and as part of the local development and renewal activities of the individual school. In cases of this kind, the prime motive often seems to be a desire for educational renewal or for the transformation of one's working situation and working methods in order to solve educational problems which have begun to feel increasingly onerous or as a means of improving the attainability of curricular goals and ambitions.

A few years ago these principal groups of motives for mixed-age teaching seemed to be more specific, but at

present they appear to be growing increasingly intertwined. At the same time, expectations concerning the educational benefits appear to be on the increase.

These conditions are among the reasons why we are attempting in this project to elucidate and analyse motives and objectives concerning vertical integration. What deliberations have taken place in different teacher groups prior to the introduction of mixed-age classes? What educational benefits are aimed for in terms of working methods, working situation and the pupils' cognitive developments, and what constraints and difficulties are anticipated? In what respects is a mixed-age class expected to improve the prospects of achieving an optimum developmental environment for the children and a learning environment which will facilitate the attainment of curricular goals and aims?

Working methods and pupil development

A mixed-age teaching group can be regarded as an organisational arrangement which per se tells us nothing concerning the nature of educational activities. And indeed, the empirical documentation analysed so far shows that mixed-age teaching is by no means a uniform activity. The circumstances, motives and objectives of the individual school, as well as the organisation of preparatory work and the formalities surrounding the establishment of mixed-age classes all vary and in themselves reflect the working approach evolved within the framework of a mixed-age organisation.

Within the project, great importance is being attached to describing the way in which class working methods are evolved and the aid range of pupil groupings is utilised for teaching purposes. It is particularly interesting to see how this working approach tallies with preconceptions and

with the goals and expectations formulated by different groups of teachers.

We have attempted by means of a questionnaire study to acquire a systematic overview of these conditions and also of the way in which teachers appraise the effects on pupils' cognitive and social development.

The following are some of the fields on which we are concentrating in order to elicit characteristic features of the working approach of mixed-age classes.

- The balance between mixed-age and single-grade teaching activities.

- The arrangement of work in various subjects, with reference to the age range of the pupil group.

- The balance between individual, group and communal work in mixed-age and single-grade lessons.

- Pupils' participation in the planning of their own work and of joint activities.

- The grouping of children and their social preferences in mixed-age groups.

- Adult co-operation in the teaching of mixed-age classes.

Vertically integrated teaching as an example of active change and development

It has been frequently observed that more thoroughgoing changes in the direction and organisation of teaching represent a slow and complicated process. The practical

possibilities of achieving and maintaining the changes desired are limited by a host of circumstances in school and further afield.

The introduction of mixed-age teaching is one example of a change in school which has an impact on organisation, teaching content and working methods and therefore also on the pupils' learning environment and developmental environment. Analysis of the ways in which various factors have both facilitated and impeded the implementation of this particular change can therefore be viewed as part of the study of the conditions and preconditions of the process of change. In this way too, one can elucidate the ways in which changes desired in various respects may conceivably influence the conditions governing pupils' cognitive and social development.

Empirical documentation - collection of data

Data for this project are mostly being collected by means of questionnaires and interviews involving teachers of vertically integrated classes. The questionnaire study for the current year includes some 300 class teachers taking vertically integrated classes at junior and intermediate levels. In addition, the project team is collecting written documentation on the mixed-age activities of various schools to provide supplementary material for elucidating experience of this work and its organisation. The project also includes intensive studies of a number of schools.

This data-collection procedure has been judged practical in view of the general aim of the project, which is to codify teachers' experience of mixed-age classes in various circumstances, with various emphases and structures and having various conceivable effects on children's development and learning.

Research link and teacher INSET

In conjunction with this project, we have conducted research-related activities by arranging teacher INSET courses on the subject of mixed-age teaching. By the end of this school year, six of these courses will have been held altogether, involving junior and intermediate level teachers from the Stockholm Higher Education Region.

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